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AUTHOR Gonzalez, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

A comparison between the second language learner and the native language learner provides the primary argument for the importance of listening without having to produce a response immediately. The fact that children listen to their native language for at least 8 hours a day implies that students need to spend more time in listening activities. In addition to growth in listening skills, there is a psychological benefit to listening activities; they are less threatening than activities in the other language skill areas. In addition to teacher-directed activities, peer-learning can take place in small group listening activities. In these groups students take responsibility for their own learning as well as for that of others in their group. Students get personal attention, they are more motivated to pay attention, and they experience a more natural range of listening experiences. Success of the small group process depends on good preparation, students' orientation to the importance of the task, and the format of the listening material. Some suggested formats that work well for small groups are picture matching; manipulatives, or objects and sentences to be matched; commands; situations; logical thinking problems; true-false statements; and paragraphs followed by true-false statements. (AMH)

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Listening Activities for Small Groups

Dr. Barbara Gonzalez
The University of Texas at San Antonio

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WHY LISTENING ACTIVITIES ARE IMPORTANT

The listening and speaking skills in second language teaching and learning have been of particular concern for the past forty years. Listening as a special focus apart from its automatic inclusion in every speech act has been an important topic for language educators for the past ten years. Recent research has stressed the great necessity for teachers to provide special opportunities for second language learners to develop their listening skills. Students need the chance to sharpen listening skills in contexts that do not require them to respond orally every sixty seconds, contexts that do not continually divert their attention from listening to speaking. A primary argument that favors this emphasis on listening derives from a comparison of the second language learner and the native speaker as a learner of the same language. Asher (1977) points out that the child of six who has heard his/her language for eight hours daily has had 17,520 hours of listening to that language (a conservative estimate). The college major in that language who has completed twelve advanced courses probably has had 780 classroom and laboratory contact hours with the language but may not have had additional contact hours. Even though most of these hours have probably been spent in listening, it comes as no surprise if that student is not functioning at a very advanced level of proficiency. Even if we may say that the older learner brings much to the language learning process with his/her ability to analyze and synthesize the working rules of the new language and with his/her more advanced knowledge of vocabulary concepts

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and real-life situations, there can surely be little comparison between 17,520 hours of listening and 780. The implication, then, is that students need to spend more class time on listening activities.

Further, most students find listening much easier than speaking. Especially in beginning classes where many students are very apprehensive about speaking, a greater emphasis on listening skills can make students feel more comfortable and can facilitate a reduction of fear, which results can in turn facilitate better performance for many students. Then it follows that students who perform better will feel more positive about their second language study and about their own abilities. The value of positive reinforcement through successful performance in the langauge cannot be overestimated.

We have noted the psychological benefits to the students to be gained from a greater emphasis on listening in the classroom, and we have noted the greater growth in listening skills that can be facilitated with the dedication of more time to aural activities. In addition, it is also reasonable to assume that greater growth in the other language skills can occur when there is more initial emphasis on the development of the listening skill. If one accepts the assumption that the student can retain more from successful listening than from less successful listening and speaking combinations, then there should be a greater knowledge base to serve as material for positive transfer for subsequent performance in reading, speaking and writing. Thus, there are several benefits which may accrue to students who have the chance to do more listening in their second language classrooms.

WHY SOME LISTENING ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE IN SMALL GROUPS

Students can be given more listening opportunities in a number of ways. The teacher can be sure to use the target language himself or

herself as much as possible, and he/she can conduct more listening activities for the class as a whole. There is another possible option, however, which has its own special benefits. Students can also conduct their own listening activities in small groups. Certainly the principles of andragogy support this notion (Knowles, 1973). Peer teaching usually results in a higher degree of involvement for students, and that involvement can result from the students' directing their own listening activities. Further, greater self-confidence in the use of the language can result from their being given this kind of opportunity. The student who can successfully present material in the target language for his/her peers' listening activity is likely to develop more positive feelings about the language and about his/her ability to use it.

In this context, the students are assuming responsibility not only for their own learning, but also for that of others in their group. As noted, this circumstance can result in greater involvement and greater self-confidence on the part of students; but there is also another possible by-product that this author has found most interesting in her own implementation of small-group listening activities. Many students improve their pronunciation dramatically. If they find when they are asked to present material for small-group listening that their peers have difficulty understanding them they pay much more careful attention to any unusual features in their pronunciation and tend to regularize these much more rapidly in response to the situation than they ever do in response to their teacher's correction in the course of a large-group activity of any kind. They are getting specific individualized assistance in pronunciation from their peers and are usually positively disposed toward this help and integrate the suggested changes.

The individualization carries over for the listeners, too. They

also can receive a high degree of attention to their personal difficulties in the framework of any listening activity. They can ask for repetitions, they can ask questions, and they can ask for adjustments of speed and volume. While some listening activities - normally those that are teacher-led - should be less controlled by students as are real-life listening presentations, it is highly advantageous that some activities be within the realm of student control so that individual difficulties can receive attention. The small-group format answers that need.

Generally speaking, students are more motivated to pay attention in the small-group setting. Nothing fascinates like one's peers and the social undertones of the small group, and even students who are properly oriented to the necessary task focus (as all should be) still derive great pleasure and thus motivation from the format that puts them in a close work situation with a few classmates. Further, the variation in format from the usual teacher-directed activity can of itself be motivating and thus facilitate higher attention levels and possible greater learning.

Finally, this variation in format from thirty students listening to the teacher to three students (or even only one) listening to another student allows for a more natural range of listening experience in the second-language classroom. In real-life the second-language learner experiences the need to listen to both natural and artificially reproduced voices, to function as one listener in a crowd, and to listen in a small-group or pair situation. Thus, the classroom should also afford the student all these different kinds of listening experiences.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

As with any sort of small-group activity, students need to be prepared to participate responsibly. They need to understand exactly what they are to do and the steps in the procedure might well be listed on the

board or handed to each group leader in written form. They need the usual orientation to the material with explanation of any terms or concepts that may be unfamiliar. They need clear instructions on how their groups are to be formed and obviously this is most easily accomplished by having them work with those by whom they are already seated.

Perhaps most important, however, is their orientation to the importance of the task. They need to know why they are doing the activity, what they can expect to derive from it, and that it is a learning experience and not an entertainment. A good way to ensure this last understanding is to point out what learnings from this activity will be dealt with in the subsequent whole-group wrap-up and in subsequent evaluation activities. With the proper preparation, students can indeed work effectively in small groups.

FORMATS

The material to be included in any small-group listening activity a teacher prepares has to be largely familiar to the students and its highlights should be quickly reviewed beforehand to maximize student performance in the activity. Any such material can be treated in a number of different formats for listening, however. The teacher need only select a format that he/she feels will be effective and appealing to his/her students.

There are a number of common formats for listening which work well for small groups.

A. PICTURE MATCHING

In this format each student pair or group is given a picture sheet or sheets comprising a dozen numbered squares of small line drawings and a sheet of two (or more) scripts of ten or so numbered statements each about the pictures. Then a student in the pair or group reads a script to his/her partner or group while he/she/they

look at the pictures. The listeners are to decide which picture each statement refers to (if any) and on their own answer sheet write that picture number by the statement number. At the end of the script they discuss the answers. Then the next student reads a script to his/her partner or group and the process is repeated.

B. MANIPULATIVES

In this format each student pair or group is given one or more packets of small pictures of pertinent objects and a sheet of two or more scripts of statements about the objects. A student reads one of the scripts to his/her group. The statements refer to a scene which the listeners are to recreate by manipulating or arranging the object pictures as described in the statements they are hearing. At the end of the script they can compare their results with one another and with the statements. Then the next student reads a script to his/her partner or group and the process is repeated.

C. COMMANDS

In this format each student pair or group receives two or more scripts of commands of the sort that can be carried out at their seats. Each partner or group member takes a turn reading a script of orders to the others, who carry them out. At the end of each script they discuss the items if they were unsure of any. Then the next student reads a script to his/her partner or group and the activity is repeated.

D. SITUATIONS

Each student pair or group receives a packet of situation cards. A student gives a monolog appropriate to the situation he/she draws without letting the others see the card , and the others listen and

guess where he/she is and/or what the problem is. Then the second student monologs his/her situation and the process continues.

E. LOGIC

Each student pair or group receives several simple logical thinking problems on cards or a sheet in the target language. A student reads the problem on his/her card (or the first problem on the sheet) to the group. The listeners may hear the problem as many times as they like but are not to read it. The group gradually solves each problem together and the next is read by another student.

F. TRUE-FALSE

Each student pair or group is given on a sheet or cards several scripts of ten or so true-false statements that involve general knowledge. Each student has a turn reading a script to the others, who listen and write true or false on an answer sheet. At the conclusion of each script the students discuss the responses. Then the next student reads a script to his/her partner or group and the process is repeated.

G. PARAGRAPH TRUE-FALSE

In this format each student pair or group receives a script of several paragraphs in the target language, each with a subsequent set of true-false statements. Each student in turn reads a paragraph and its statements to his/her group. The listeners record their true or false responses on a separate sheet, and at the end of each segment the group discusses the answers. Then the next student reads a script to his/her partner or group and the process is repeated.

SUMMARY

Successful listening is a critical underpinning to one's learning and performance in a new language. Teachers of second languages need to include more listening activities in their class routines, and they also need to consider a greater variety of formats and class-organizational styles for those activities. The small-group format is not often utilized for listening activities and yet has much to recommend it. There are a significant number of psychological and pedagogical benefits to having students carry out listening activities in small groups. A number of the commonly employed listening formats work well in small groups, and many activity formats described in recent second-language publications are suitable for adaptation to both the listening skill and to the small group.

From ACTFL '82 - the rest of the presentation was a demonstration.

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